



# THE HINDU CENTRE

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## Textbooks and the Curriculum: Understanding the Politics



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Staff at the AKTP Municipal High School, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, arrange textbooks for distribution among students. File photo: GIRI KVS/ The Hindu

*In many countries across the world, the active omnipresence of conflicting ideologies is nowhere as apparent as when it comes to official textbooks. Governments often use them to propagate the dominant ideological perspective. What makes this phenomenon a cause for public concern is when selective culling of established knowledge is ordered by a government to advance its political project.*

*In this article, **Krishna Kumar, a former Director of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT)**, explains how the latest deletions from NCERT's textbooks represent a retrograde step that damages the intent and substance of significant curricular reforms. He also explains the likely impact these deletions would have on the teaching of different subjects in schools and on the system itself. He provides a pathway to understanding the political mind and the bureaucratic process that works behind the framing of school curricula. Krishna Kumar is the author of several books on education and childhood. His latest title, 'Smaller Citizens', was published last year. His new book, 'Thank You, Gandhi', will be published next year.*

**I**f you delete a few pages from a book, it will surely weigh less. If it is a textbook, this diminished weight will not necessarily imply that the curriculum it covers will also get lighter. In all probability, deletions from a textbook will make the curriculum feel heavier. This peculiar phenomenon was noticed by the Yash Pal Committee set up by the Union government in 1991 to suggest ways to reduce curriculum load. Its report, submitted two years later, pointed out that a major reason why children find learning at school burdensome is the lack of coherence in textbooks. When children fail to make sense of how the prescribed textbook explains concepts and provides information, they resort to cramming in order to overcome the sense of burden. The report, titled *Learning without Burden*<sup>1</sup>, recommended greater deliberation in designing a syllabus in order to ensure that textbooks do not force children to cram.

One of its recommendations read:

*“11. The public examinations taken at the end of Class X and XII be reviewed with a view to ensuring the replacement of the prevailing text-based and ‘quiz type’ questioning with concept-based questioning. This single reform is sufficient to improve the quality of learning and save the children from the tyranny of rote memorisation.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Related Articles from The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy:**

**Radhakrishnan, A. 2023.** *Essay: Leveraging Social Mobility: What India’s Schools are Missing*, January 19.

**Bhattacharya, S. 2017.** *Interview: India has not taken education seriously since independence: Prof. Krishna Kumar*, December 1.

Subsequently, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), used this approach for drafting syllabi for different subjects to implement the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. The syllabi and textbooks were the best possible attempt to enable students to grasp concepts and information in a lucid and integrated manner. These textbooks lasted till now more or less intact but the news pouring in since April 2023 tell us that they have had their day. They are now being mutilated with dozens of deletions in the name of reducing curriculum load. The same NCERT that had worked hard to design the syllabus and develop textbooks is now vigorously pruning them. The process has been packaged under the label ‘rationalisation’. The exercise has aroused dramatic responses from the media. One headline is: ‘Here is what students would never learn about history from textbooks’ (The Times of India, April 10)<sup>3</sup>. Another reads: ‘Key deletions in just published NCERT textbooks awaken Indian media’ (Indian Printer and Publisher, April 13)<sup>4</sup>. These are but two examples of the widely

covered changes in school curricula and content of textbooks. Some of the deletions were notified by the NCERT itself. However, there were many more, and two months on, teachers continue to notice changes and cuts.

### Related Resource

**National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT).**  
**1993.** [Learning Without Burden – Report of the National Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development](#), Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi.

There is little point in elaborately listing them here. Several newspapers have done that. The significance of these deletions and changes has also been extensively

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discussed. Therefore, some indicative instances will do. In the social sciences, anything that does not match the neo-nationalist ideology of the

ruling party has been dropped. It is assumed that if students don't learn about Mughal kings, poverty, inequality, diversity, and protest movements; it will not harm or hamper their understanding of the social sciences. Deletions are bold: whole chapters have been removed. Nor have images been spared. On certain themes, we notice more selective deletions—from paragraphs and sentences. For instance, in the coverage of Gandhi's assassination, the references to Hindu nationalists and Godse's caste background have been scissored out. There is little point in denying the ideological inspiration behind such changes, yet the NCERT insists on calling them a part of 'rationalisation'. Dropping a poem by progressive critics of their times, Nirala or Muktibodh, doesn't reduce the curricular burden. If

it does, one should ask, why were they put into the textbook in the first place? It is ironic that an organisation set up to produce and spread reliable knowledge should believe in the power of ignorance more than that of learning.

In the sciences, this approach extends to stage-wise uses of ignorance. Darwin's theory has been withdrawn from Grade X but retained in Grade XI. The idea is that only those opting for Biology at the Higher Secondary stage need to know about evolution. The same logic applies to the Periodic Table of the Elements in Chemistry. A vast number of students don't study beyond Grade X for various reasons. If they learn Biology without Darwin's theory, they might be 'better' prepared to believe in other ways of thinking about nature and life. These alternative ways can be freely drawn from religion and mythology. One can go on like this, guessing what might be the reason behind the cuts in various subjects at different stages. NCERT's own justification is a simpler monotone: reducing curricular burden.

Learning Biology without grasping evolutionism, Sociology without making sense of inequality, and Economics without recognising poverty is obviously problematic. One can argue that not everyone pursues these subjects with all their basic concepts understood. This would be a fair statement to make. However, if one argued that there is no need to teach these concepts to students who have not opted them for the Higher Secondary stage, such an argument may not be sustainable. Consider the Periodic Table. It is the basis of fundamental ways in which one makes sense of Chemistry. To argue that it is not needed before Grade XI borders on the bizarre. Its deletion from the Grade X textbook of Science makes little sense if the purpose of Science teaching is not just to inform but explain.

### **Three characteristics**

The idea that deleting some parts of a textbook would reduce curriculum 'load' reveals three key aspects of India's system of education. All three were shaped by

its history. The first aspect is the symbolic value of the textbook—as a document authorised by the state. The policy of prescribing a single textbook for each subject started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. When the present-day system of education was taking shape, the colonial state found in the printed textbook a reliable means of standardising pedagogy, learning, and evaluation.

### Related articles from The Hindu Group:

#### The Hindu:

1. **Datta, S. 2023.** [Darwin must stay in Indian school textbooks](#), April 28.
2. **The Hindu. 2023.** [NCERT Textbook Row | 33 academicians ask to remove their names from textbooks](#), June 15.
3. **The Hindu. 2023.** [NCERT responds as 'embarrassed' Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar ask academic body to drop their name as advisors](#), June 9.

#### Frontline:

1. **Welle, D. 2023.** [NCERT drops periodic table, Pythagorean theorem, and evolution from textbooks](#), June 5.
2. **Devy, G. 2023.** [Despite the NCERT's shocking move, Gandhi lives on](#), May 4.
3. **Murthi, S.K. A, 2023.** [Exclusion of Darwin's theory from Class 10 textbooks indicates attempt to rationalise caste system](#), April 26.

#### The Hindu Businessline:

1. **Raghavan, TCA S. 2023.** [History taught in schools must be balanced, in extent and coverage](#), April 6.
2. **Jigeesh, A.M. 2021.** [Rewriting history. House panel calls for revamping content, design of school textbooks](#), November 26.
3. **Kurmanath, K. V. 2012.** [An app soon for text books to lighten your kids' school bags](#), July 2.

Earlier, the state did not directly publish textbooks. However, from the late 1950s onwards, provincial directorates established textbook corporations or bureaus to publish textbooks at a low price. When the NCERT was established in 1961, its mandate was to improve the quality of teaching material. Initially, it did not publish textbooks, but within a few years, it started preparing and publishing 'model' textbooks. At the secondary level, some States allow private publishers to 'print' a textbook based on the State's syllabus. In every case, the textbooks chosen by a State body, such as a Board, carry greater authority than any other available in the market. It is seen as a document approved by the government — one that has acquired political value.

The second aspect is the compulsion on the teacher to use the prescribed textbook as the main—for the majority, the only—pedagogic resource. In junior classes, teachers are seldom aware of the curriculum, and they regard the textbook as the syllabus. This is how the system has functioned for a long time, and the idea that the textbook is the curriculum has stayed firmly lodged in the teacher's mind. The teacher is also expected to 'finish' it, i.e. teach the whole of it. The vast majority of teachers work under the impression that they should not use any other resource or material in the class. Their impression is not wrong: quite often when a young or enthusiastic teacher brings a non-textbook to the class or expands the scope of the syllabus by using an original pedagogic resource, she is vulnerable to be told off for doing so by the principal or some other authority. For instance, if a teacher brings to children's attention two or three poems by the poet one of whose poems is in the prescribed textbook, she is more often criticised rather than appreciated. At times, even parents object to any step a teacher might take to enrich children's understanding. The absence of teacher's academic autonomy sets the Indian teacher apart from teachers in other countries. In India too, teachers at a high-end

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school have more professional autonomy than their counterparts at a government or low-end private school.

The third feature is the relationship between the textbook and the examination, the high point of which is the decisive status of the latter in all aspects of school life. It would be quite accurate if someone says that India's system of education is essentially an examination system. Learning is subservient to success in the examination. And exam success is not an evidence of learning or understanding. There are many ways to achieve exam success, one being to cram the text of the prescribed textbook.

From the earliest grades, children are made conscious that their knowledge and skills will be tested, so they should pay attention. The satisfaction of learning something well takes second place to showing mastery in an examination. As children grow older, the exam-centric character of classroom teaching stretches to cover every aspect of their life. The fear of failing or not doing well in the exam becomes crucial, and the teacher feels the pressure to stick to the textbook on which the examination will be based. The exam-centricity of teaching conveys the message that if a piece of information does not exist in the textbook, it is not important and, therefore, it need not be studied. This message creates a competitive environment among lobbies, including ideological lobbies, to push the items supportive of their perspective and interests into textbooks and engineer the pulling out of the rival items.

These three aspects of the system are relevant for textbooks published by private publishers, but not to the same extent as they affect textbooks published by government agencies. Although both sets are based on the same syllabus, a private publisher's textbook has greater latitude to treat a topic as its author or authors may want to. As I have indicated above, privately published textbooks are not used



in government schools, hence they do not represent the government's view on any matter. In fact, they are rarely the subject of public scrutiny even though, notionally, they are 'written' according to the State/CBSE/ICSE syllabus. Such labels on the front page have little value or meaning in any official sense. In fact, privately published textbooks for the teaching of language may have a set of literary selections that is completely different from that of a State textbook if the schools using the former take a different, private board's examination. This is one reason why public boards like CBSE or its State equivalents receive so much media attention.

The current textbook controversy is unlikely to remain in the public eye for long. Awkward or not, the view that deletions or distortions are a part of 'rationalisation' or policy change of sorts will eventually stick. Teachers will certainly not speak out against any change; nor will parents. Private schools, especially the high-end ones, who don't appreciate the changes might start considering shifting to a private board, national, or international. Once a school moves up to a higher social or global plane, it forgets about the controversies that Indian textbooks are prone to, just as the higher levels of the urban middle class do not worry about news from smaller towns and villages. Hierarchical India wins after each textbook battle. The poorer strata don't worry about such battles either, as their concern is solely to see their children get high marks in exams and higher ranks in competitive tests.

### **Why textbook conflicts matter**

But textbook conflicts do matter. One instance of a long-lasting controversy should suffice to illustrate how significant textbooks are in political life. Hard-boiled they may be, but politicians do find it an attractive romantic idea that every child will read, and will be taught, about their achievements and glory. They know, of course,

that what is read in the textbook does not necessarily stay in the mind after the annual exam is over, but this realisation does not make the romance of a textbook-mention any less attractive. It becomes stronger in societies where children's reading is confined to the textbook. During my NCERT years, I was under constant pressure to include the biography or picture of this or that leader or hero. Suggesting that a children's book on such a figure might be a better alternative did not cut any ice with lobbyists. They knew that children's books—even those published by the NCERT itself—do not have a wide market. Textbooks, on the other hand, enjoy a huge captive market because they are prescribed.

Some people wonder if textbook controversies are going to be a permanent feature of Indian education. In countries where political divisions are sharp and

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where they reflect a deep ideological division, textbooks remain a contested territory, especially if the government has any stake in publishing or approving them. Similar is the story of countries that have gone through serious political turmoil. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, school curricula in Russia became a matter of considerable upheaval, especially in History. Even now, when Russia has not quite accepted its own dissolution, what is to be taught to children about the Gorbachev era, during which the Soviet Union collapsed, remains contested. Between Israel and Palestine, and between Japan and South Korea, textbook conflicts have proved difficult to settle. In India, the medieval period of history has repeatedly proved to be a politically charged terrain, and ancient history is not far behind. When TV debaters argue that history should be based on facts and children should be taught nothing but facts, they come across as being unnecessarily innocent about the significant role that the arguments based on perceptual history have played in shaping recent politics in India.

In the U.S., where the state does not publish any textbooks, and there is hardly any federal-level interest in shaping the curriculum, textbook controversies are rampant<sup>5</sup>. America's racial divide is, of course, one major axis around which textbooks can be categorised, but there are several other issues that cause conflict. The theory of evolution is, in fact, a major point of conflict in the US. Creationists do not like the theory of evolution to be taught to children. The fierce debate over 'critical race theory' has facilitated the rise of discontent with a long-term attempt made to discourage racist stereotyping. Given that teachers are free to choose textbooks, or to teach with the help of other resources, textbook controversies do not result in deletions or rewriting, but boards in several States in America do resort to banning of books, including novels, and barring their purchase by school libraries.

## **The Aftermath**

Following the large deletions and re-editing of certain portions in NCERT, several members and chiefs of textbook committees that had developed these textbooks have asked NCERT to drop their names from future editions and the current internet edition<sup>6</sup>. It is rather astonishing that the NCERT has declined this request. Perhaps it does not want to drop these names because they represent the best-known scholars in different fields. Keeping them on board while their work has been denied its integrity as a text is apparently believed to be in NCERT's interest as an apex school-knowledge-producing body. Clearly, the last chapter of the controversy over deletions is far from having been written. Those who worked hard to prepare these textbooks naturally expected that they would be consulted before any changes are made. And if they were not consulted, their names ought to be dropped now. NCERT does not agree with this rather plain logic.

*(The author is a former Director of NCERT. His new book, 'Thank You, Gandhi' will be published next year.)*

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[All URLs were last accessed on July 4, 2023]

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